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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study began with a sample of Missouri graduates from the class of 1981 and extended over a five-year period. Thirteen area vocational-technical schools along with their corresponding sending high schools participated. A strict random sampling procedure produced roughly equivalent samples, one of vocational graduates and a second of nonvocational graduates. Purpose of the study was to determine the successes or difficulties of graduates in using skills and knowledge acquired in high school to make a successful and economically rewarding transition from high school into the immediate post-high school years. The study compared and contrasted the samples, focusing primarily on economic aspects relative to salary and employment. Findings showed that vocational graduates earned more money, had more job stability, held more full-time jobs, and were more confident of their ability to compete for employment after graduation. The majority of vocational graduates were employed in an area related to their training. Graduates who worked in high school earned more after graduation. Nonvocational graduates were more likely to continue their education. Most graduates indicated job satisfaction. Graduates advised students to continue their education and advised educators to provide job experience, encourage further education, and provide job placement services and career counseling. (YLB)

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THE LONGITUDINAL FOLLOW-UP of 1981 MISSOURI HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Final Report

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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"As students develop, allow them to assume more responsibility and give them more respect as young adults. Stress importance of future career decisions. Listen to students - do not just *say*, "We listen to students."

"I'd really like to emphasize that we need to get a little tougher with our standards. We need a better education. I find myself (one who graduated at a reasonably high level) competing with people who seem to have a much superior educational background. Someone has to be below average, but why us?"

"I am grateful I decided to learn a trade in high school and take advantage of a 'free education.' I enjoyed working in data entry and now I enjoy being a mother and homemaker. I feel it should be stressed to students that you have to *know* something to earn a living. Vocational Tech school is the best education I received during my school years."

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Missouri Testing and Evaluation Service / College of Education
University of Missouri-Columbia / October 1987

The Longitudinal Follow-up of 1981 High School Graduates

Final Report
October, 1987

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FOREWORD

The "big picture" of education is composed of smaller subsets which must be clearly defined and supported so that the individuals upon whom programs and activities are focused will receive maximum benefits.

The positive results of this longitudinal study of 1981 Missouri High School Graduates justify the public support for vocational education in the secondary schools. These findings not only acknowledge the positive benefits gained from participating in a vocational education program but also request that a greater demand be placed on education, vocational education, and the students themselves.

Individuals should be served according to their needs, interests, abilities, and actual or anticipated opportunities. Administrators are constantly faced with the pressures of 1) Economy — maximum returns for the tax dollar investment, 2) Efficiency — providing the necessary diversity of programs and supporting services, and 3) Excellence — maximum quality in every aspect of education. Exemplary programs blend individual needs, interests, abilities with economy and efficiency, yielding excellence.

The ultimate value of this study depends upon its utilization by those with decision-making responsibilities for educational programs at the local, state, and national levels. Through this utilization a subset of the "big picture," vocational education, can be identified and supported because of the outcomes and services provided to those who benefit from it.

Frank Drake
Assistant Commissioner
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Elementary and Secondary Education

INTRODUCTION

The Follow-up Study of Missouri High School Graduates, "Follow-up Now—Class of '81," (FUN '81) was a longitudinal study begun with a sample of Missouri graduates from the class of 1981, and extended over a five-year period. It was developed by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in cooperation with Missouri Testing and Evaluation Service, University of Missouri-Columbia.

Thirteen area vocational-technical schools along with their corresponding sending high schools participated in the study. A strict random sampling procedure was employed to produce roughly equivalent samples, one consisting of vocational graduates and a second consisting of non-vocational graduates. The study yielded a high response rate over a five-year period, with a range from 62% to 77%.

The overall purpose of the study was to determine the successes or difficulties of high school vocational and non-vocational graduates in utilizing the skills and knowledge acquired in high school to make a successful and economically rewarding transition from high school into the immediate post high school years. The study was also designed to compare and contrast the vocational and non-vocational samples, focusing primarily on economic aspects relative to salary and employment.

The investigation employed several strategies and techniques distinct from those used in most longitudinal studies of this type. Chief among these were classification into vocational and non-vocational samples and division into full- and part-time employment. The students were provided personalized letters with group feedback, and subjective comments by students were solicited. Additionally, data from the Missouri Division of Employment Security was utilized, and corroborated the self-reported data provided by the graduates themselves.

Many of the findings of this study might be expected, but they still require documentation. The typical concern of studies of this type is to determine the economic benefits and job satisfaction of graduates. In this study we solicited personal comments from the graduates in their efforts to make a successful transition from school to work. We believed many of these to be very meaningful and often reflecting a maturity not always associated with this age group. We have interspersed several of these comments (in the graduates' own words) throughout the text and have included an additional number at the end of the report.

This document presents the salient findings of the study coupled with subjective responses from participating graduates. Editorial comments are presented at the end of the report.

The documents below provide statistical support for the major findings presented in this report.

1. Technical report of the April and October 1981 questionnaires, including description of the sample selection, definitions, and procedures.
2. Individual reports 1982 through 1985.
3. Selected trend responses from 1981 through 1985.
4. Summary report of Employment Security information.
5. Responses by graduates to narrative questions of the study.
6. Responses to questions soliciting "advice" from graduates.

I am aware that this is the last questionnaire, but I would like to continue receiving statistics on the up-and-coming graduates. Even though I have been out of high school for four years, I haven't begun to scratch the surface, because of mistakes I've made. In completing these questionnaires I'm encouraged more and more to try and make a good impression and an everlasting influence of stability and ambition to those enthusiastic upcoming graduates.

I've enjoyed the years of receiving and answering these follow-ups. I hope, though, that the program has worked well for you and the students to "benefit" from these surveys. I hope, also, that at least a few of my suggestions and (although limited) experiences have helped. You say this is the last survey, but why not do another a few more years down the road?

I have enjoyed doing these reports. Although they have been time consuming, I am glad that I have done these surveys because it helps me to know how others are doing besides myself.

Please keep sending me these follow-up studies. I feel that they're real good for keeping track of former students once they are gone from high school. I would like to continue being included in these follow-ups.

MAJOR FINDINGS

I. VOCATIONAL GRADUATES EARN MORE MONEY THAN NON-VOCATIONAL GRADUATES

The self-reported median hourly salary of the vocational sample was higher than that of the non-vocational sample 1981 through 1985 both full-time and part-time. Objective salary data from Employment Security files supported and enhanced the self-reported information, again showing that the vocational sample consistently maintained its salary advantage over the non-vocational sample. The vocational group held its salary advantage even in 1985, when the four-year college graduates hit the labor market. Data show a 15% to 20% annual salary advantage over non-vocational graduates. Vocational education should receive its share of the credit for this finding. Further education appears to be a salary enhancer as well.

Set goals and go after them instead of waiting for things to fall in place by themselves; make it an active process and draw on everyone and every resource you know.

II. VOCATIONAL GRADUATES HAVE MORE JOB STABILITY THAN NON-VOCATIONAL GRADUATES

The median number of months worked at their current or most recent job by full-time vocational graduates rose from 5 in 1981 to 20 in 1985; the median number of months for full-time non-vocational graduates increased from 4 to 12 over the same period. For vocational graduates in part-time jobs, the median length of employment rose from 5 months in 1981 to 17 months in 1985; the non-vocational sample showed an increase from 4 months in 1981 to 9 months in 1985.

I feel it's very important to be well educated, but I think a problem a lot of people have is not knowing themselves and that is a must before getting a job and trying to work with other people or for other people.

III. MORE VOCATIONAL GRADUATES ARE EMPLOYED THAN NON-VOCATIONAL GRADUATES

Sixty-five percent of the vocational graduates reported working in October 1981. This percentage rose each year to 79% in 1985. The percentage of the non-vocational sample showed an increase from 47% to 74% during the same period.

Give your job everything you've got—be honest with your boss and to your company. But most of all be enthusiastic in your work. Also set a goal and work for it. That's the only way you can be a success.

IV. MORE VOCATIONAL GRADUATES HOLD FULL-TIME JOBS THAN NON-VOCATIONAL GRADUATES

Of those graduates working, the percentage of vocational graduates reporting holding full-time jobs rose from 61% in 1981 to 92% in 1985; non-vocational full-time job holders rose from 35% to 74% during the same period.

Stress that no matter what the job is, take it seriously and give the employer what he's paying for.

V. THE MAJORITY OF VOCATIONAL GRADUATES ARE EMPLOYED IN AN AREA RELATED TO THEIR TRAINING

The data show that the employment of graduates in training-related jobs ranged from 55% in 1981 to 60% in 1983 and 1984, with an average of 58% over the five-year period.

I am very thankful I was able to be involved in Vo-Tech. It was a great experience for me. It not only trained me for my job but also to be able to handle the whole world.

VI. VOCATIONAL GRADUATES ARE MORE CONFIDENT OF THEIR ABILITY TO COMPETE FOR EMPLOYMENT AFTER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION THAN NON-VOCATIONAL GRADUATES

The seniors in the sample were confident of their ability to compete for employment after high school graduation. Ninety-one percent of the vocational seniors and 82% of the non-vocational seniors thought they would be able to compete "very well" or "fairly well" for a job after high school graduation.

You have to sell yourself. You can't just send resumes out and expect to get the job. Go with your resume and prove to the employer that you are a hard worker and that you want the job.

VII. GRADUATES WHO WORK WHILE ATTENDING HIGH SCHOOL EARN MORE AFTER GRADUATION THAN THOSE WHO DID NOT WORK WHILE ATTENDING HIGH SCHOOL

Employment Security figures show a 7% to 14% salary advantage for graduates who worked during their senior year. This corroborates subjective comments by graduates to the effect that it is advantageous to work while in school.

I advise high school students to begin working while still in H.S., if only as a volunteer or working for family/friends. It is very important to start an employment history as early as possible.

VIII. NON-VOCATIONAL GRADUATES ARE MORE LIKELY TO CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION

The data show that the percentage of individuals attending school after graduation varied considerably between the non-vocational and vocational samples, from 63% to 28% during the period 1981 through 1985 for the non-vocational sample and from 38% to 16% during the same period for the vocational sample. The non-vocational graduates were much more likely to attend school, either full-time or part-time, than were vocational graduates.

I wish I had taken high school seriously now. I know I could have been a straight-A student if I had only put in the effort. It's just too bad most kids don't realize that until later.

IX. THE GRADUATES' UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IS LOW

Unemployment of the total sample showed a decline from 13% in 1981 to 3% in 1985. These rates are substantially lower than national and state rates of 27% for 1981 and 15% for 1985 for the 16-24 age group.

Don't sit around and wait for a job to knock on your door. Go out and knock down a few doors yourself.

X. MOST GRADUATES LEARN OF THEIR JOBS THROUGH FAMILY, FRIENDS AND RELATIVES

Fifty percent to 60% of the sample responding from 1983 through 1985 indicated that they had heard of their jobs through family, friends and relatives; twenty-eight percent to 31% indicated teachers, employers, and others.

Pay attention to older people – they have more experience. Remember you don't know all the answers.

XI. MOST GRADUATES INDICATE JOB SATISFACTION

Seventy-five percent to 80% of the graduates consistently indicated that they were satisfied with their current or most recent job, 1981 through 1985.

Find something you enjoy doing. I feel it's more important to enjoy what you're doing than to make lots of money and to be unhappy.

XII. MOST GRADUATES EXPRESS SATISFACTION WITH THEIR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Approximately 87% to 92% of the graduates felt satisfied with their current educational program during the period 1981-1985.

Study as much as possible. An educated man is a rich man. Believe in yourself and don't be afraid of trying to find what you want.

XIII. VERY FEW GRADUATES ARE SELF-EMPLOYED

Five percent to 7% of the sample 1983 to 1985 indicated they were self-employed.

Be assertive and take the initiative to make and reach goals. Believe and have confidence in yourself. Don't be afraid to show your talents or knowledge in areas of interest on an everyday basis.

XIV. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES ADVISE STUDENTS TO START EARLY, TO BE PERSISTENT AND TO CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION

Advice from graduates should be attended to by school personnel. Information from the graduates was solicited in 1981 and 1985 regarding advice for other high school graduates in getting their first jobs after graduation. Several themes ran through the top five responses in both 1981 and 1985. High school graduates were advised to get a job they like and to understand that their personal characteristics and presentation are important. The graduates focused on the importance of continuing education in the 1985 questionnaire, with 36% of the graduates indicating this as their number one piece of advice. This replaced "Start early and be persistent," the top response in 1981.

Don't waste time – decide what you want to do and go for it! Once you do, don't give up until you get there.

I believe it is very important to continue your education. Whether it be college, trade or technical school, further education is critical in making it in the 'real world.'

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XV. GRADUATES ADVISE EDUCATORS TO HAVE CLASSES THAT PROVIDE JOB EXPERIENCE AND JOB INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE. EDUCATORS ARE ALSO ADVISED TO ENCOURAGE FURTHER EDUCATION, MAKE STUDENTS WORK HARDER, AND TEACH STUDENTS MATURITY

The graduates again focused on more long-term advice in 1985 when asked what schools should do in preparing students to make the transition to the post-high school world. The top five responses included encouraging further education, stressing hard work, teaching maturity, telling students what it is like in the real world, and providing career counseling. In October 1981 the focus was on shorter-range concepts, the top response suggesting classes giving job experience. Providing classes on interviews, encouraging hard work, providing information on the job market, and paying attention to students' interests rounded out the top five in 1981.

Have more classes that have to do with real-live experience. Try more on-the-job training. Place students in an actual job situation and grade them on how they handle themselves.

I think the schools should prepare all the students more. Teach them all aspects of getting a job and going about getting on, what to look for, how to spot certain things in a job, etc.

Be aware of job openings in the community, and offer to call the employers and talk. Help the kids to form positive self images and to be confident about their ability to get a job. Teach them to fill out applications, how to dress, what to say, etc.

Please encourage your students to continue their education in some way. Make classes difficult enough where students must study to make their grades.

Require students to take more basics and encourage them to take courses which will help them in their particular field of interest. Attitude, cooperation, participation, and attendance should be stressed.

XVI. GRADUATES INDICATE THAT SCHOOLS SHOULD PROVIDE JOB PLACEMENT SERVICES AND INDIVIDUALIZED CAREER COUNSELING

One category which stands out from the others, cited by half the sample in 1981, advised the schools to provide a job placement service with activities such as posting job listings, maintaining contact with employers, writing reference letters, with "career day" becoming the foremost piece of advice in 1985. Twenty-one percent of the non-vocational sample but only 7% of the vocational sample advised individualized career counseling, a rather significant difference, possibly indicating a special need for this type of activity in comprehensive high schools. The need for career planning and placement centers, business and job service listings, and current information on colleges and universities rounded out the top five suggestions in 1985.

A job placement program would be very helpful – also a course in advising students in the proper way to apply for a job, prepare resumes, and job interviews.

More career counseling, planning and testing for aptitudes. Communications classes could make a difference in a lot of grads by experiencing interview situations, etc.

EDITORIAL: REAL PEOPLE IN A LESS THAN PERFECT WORLD

The subjects of a follow-up study are real people – individuals with emotions, aspirations, successes and failures – whose experiences from the past can assist us to be more effective in the present and future, if only we listen and attend to what they say.

The Longitudinal Follow-up Study of 1981 Missouri High School Graduates (FUN '81) has attempted to capture a portrait of the real people as well as the statistics, with a focus on the subjective as well as the objective, the personal as well as the impersonal.

As we all know, the post-high school world is often a very confusing place. Making a smooth, profitable, and enjoyable transition can be quite an arduous task, even for those who plan for the future. Job entry is often difficult, and establishment in a career typically requires several job changes before becoming a reality. High school graduates may feel they are pitted against the proverbial "cold, cruel world." How prepared are high school graduates, particularly vocational graduates, to meet the challenges of the world beyond graduation? That is the salient question that this research story attempts to help answer.

The findings of the present investigation strongly corroborate the premise that vocational graduates fare better than non-vocational graduates during the first five-year post-graduate period in terms of economics, job satisfaction, competition for employment, job stability, and the like. It should be remembered that the positive outcomes of vocational education as identified by the major findings of this study are generated by real, live human beings. One person unable to find a job after high school can be lost in impersonal statistics, but to that individual, his/her individual statistic is what matters most. If one's own son or daughter finds satisfaction in a job due primarily to vocational training, that statistic assumes paramount importance. We must continue to translate statistics into the needs of human beings.

ADDENDUM OF SELECTED GRADUATE RESPONSES AND COMMENTS

We feel the following quotations reflect the serious intent and commitment of these graduates to fellow students, to school personnel, and to education; as one graduate said "Listen to students – do not just say 'We listen to students'."

Have confidence in yourself and stand up for what you believe.

Learn all you can, but keep your common sense—don't get down on yourself for getting laid off from your job. Just keep looking and don't quit till you get what you want, work harder for it. And you'll get it if you want it.

Students at the high school level must first of all get into good study habits. This is invaluable if going to college. They must also get their priorities set straight. The main reason for college is education, not partying!

It's up to the student as to how much he gets out of school. The school could do everything in the world to prepare a student, but if he doesn't want to learn, they've just wasted their time.

Take school very seriously. Study hard and often. I didn't take school very seriously and now I regret it.

Thoroughly research the field you plan to enter and, if possible, talk to people in that field to find out the requirements and the best way to go about starting your career in that field.

It's not always what you know but who you know and how you've conducted yourself in relation to people connected with your life.

Try to find what you really want to do. If you aren't sure, you only go in circles (and get nothing accomplished).

Learn how to study seriously and be prepared to take jobs 'beneath' you to achieve your end goals.

Don't put bad ideas into their minds. I was expecting a lot worse than what I got.

Run the school more like it is at work instead of at school.

They should be more up to date on the job market—salaries, what jobs are available, what certain schooling or training you need, etc. Provide more classes that prepare kids for jobs.

Make realistic goals for your future and prepare as early as possible to meet the expectations of the post-high school world. Teach students to be aware of their coping mechanisms and how these mechanisms can make situations better or worse.

To succeed in the world one has to know what he wants to do and work hard at it. I didn't decide to go to college until I had worked in a machine shop for a year and realized I didn't want to be a machinist. That one year of work helped my decide my future better than all four years of high school did.

I have had great success after high school. Some of this is due to the high school I attended, but much more was based on the efforts I personally made.

Don't mislead them by 'guiding them along.' The real world, whether it be college or a job, will not help them along. It becomes your own responsibility.

Better counseling. All the counsel I ever received from the high school was that I probably wouldn't do well and not to expect too much of myself. That is the worst advice I have ever heard of.

During high school, try to get part-time jobs so you will be 'experienced.'

Be aggressive and don't be discouraged. Don't always look for the highest paying job. It's more important to be happy with what you are doing.

Counselors should work with each student, finding their interests and providing them with information on possible careers and what they involve.

Money is not as important as getting along with your employer and being happy.

Don't be scared. Jump right in and learn what there is to learn. Don't be afraid to give what it takes to do your best job.

I think that the schools should really show a lot of care and concern for the kids. Therefore, it will be easier for schools to help because the kids will be motivated.

Place more emphasis on practical knowledge and skills and obliterate all the 'filler' stuff that isn't beneficial.

Have more classes that have to do with real-life experience.

Counselors should expand services to include job development.

Teenagers have so many problems trying to grow up; teachers and counselors should try to be understanding, encouraging, and helpful by talking and listening to troubled students and letting them know they care and would like to help instead of coming off like an authority figure. I know most teachers are not like this, but some are.

Kids in high school should know that hard work is a part of life. They should get involved in as many things as possible in high school to teach them how to get involved in college. That is what employers look for. Kids should take the attitude that they need to do well in grades, not 'I hope I don't flunk out—I just want a 2.0.' Ninety percent of those people flunk out.

If you go to a trade school go to learn, not to goof off. You can't make any money if you don't know how to do your job.

I think everyone should get some kind of training because if they don't they're going to be like me, not knowing what they want or where they'll ever go.